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XII. On Latin Adulare

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CICERO in the second book of the *Tusculan Disputations* discusses the endurance of pain, and, having cited the case of Prometheus, he adds his own¹ translation of a passage which has from the first been recognized as part of the lost *Προμηθεὺς Λυόμενος* of Aeschylus. The suffering Titan is himself the speaker here; after telling the chorus of his kinsmen how his vitals are torn each third day by the eagle of Zeus, he continues with the lines :

Tum iecore opimo parta et satiata adfatim
Clangorem fundit vastum et sublime avolans²
Pinnata cauda nostrum adulat sanguinem.³

"With a loud cry he soars aloft, and with (or *from*?) his plumed tail he — my blood."

What was it that the eagle did? A long line of commentators and lexicographers show a curious agreement upon a strange interpretation.

The latest edition of the *Tusculans* accessible to me (Nutting, 1909) gives in the notes the bare explanation *adulat* : 'wipes off.'⁴ And the lexicons confirm this. The Harper Dictionary cites this very passage and translates : "the eagle strokes, *i.e.* wipes off our blood." So Georges's *Wörterbuch*, which tries to give a more accurate translation : "*streichelnd* wischt er mein Blut mit dem Federschweif ab."

But it must strike the reader on reflection that this is a strange meaning for *adulat*. The new *Thesaurus*, moreover, which also quotes the line, does not assign any peculiar mean-

¹ So he is understood to call it later in § 26. But his words refer to his general practice : *Studiosae equidem utor nostris poetis ; sed sicubi illi defecerunt, verti multa de Graecis, ne quo ornamento in hoc genere disputationis careret Latina oratio.*

² Several Mss. and the earliest editions have *advolans*. Some editors have emended to *involans* or *abvolans*. I give the reading now generally adopted.

³ II, 24.

⁴ So in the notes of Dougan, *Tusc. Disp.* (1905).

ing to the word, and apparently expects it to be interpreted here with the same meaning that it bears elsewhere in Latin. Neither *adulo* nor *adulor* (forms of each are found) is a specially rare word, and nowhere else do they show any noteworthy deviation from that meaning which is suggested by the English derivative 'adulation,' and this whether the writers are speaking of fawning animals or wheedling men. When joined to the consideration that the sense obtained by giving this meaning to *adulat* here, is unnatural and undignified, there seems good reason for assuming that the editors, whether of Aeschylus' fragments or of Cicero's *Tusculans*, have been mistaken in accepting this interpretation.

It may be said at this point that the choice of the word may not have been Cicero's in the first place. The sentence is quoted by Nonius¹ and ascribed to Attius, not to Cicero. While the reputation of Nonius as to accuracy is none too good, there is no inherent difficulty in supposing that in this case he is correct. Attius did write a *Prometheus*, of which a line or two is extant. What we know of Cicero's admiration for his plays and of the ancient custom of transferring other men's good lines to one's own work, make it quite probable that Cicero is here using one or more verses from his favorite tragedian. He had just quoted four anapestic lines from Attius' *Philoctetes*;² perhaps the same papyrus roll handily contained the *Prometheus*. Scholars have always been divided on the point. Weil (*Aeschylus*, 1862) decides against Nonius. But the fact which he cites, that Priscian (x, p. 907) and Arusianus Messus (I, p. 216) "praise" parts of these lines as Cicero's, does not necessarily prove that Cicero wrote them in the first place. Great writers generally get credit for what they take, no less than for what they make. Others, from the time of Turnebus³ on, have been willing to admit that Cicero may have taken *aliquot versiculos* from Attius' *Prometheus*, and this verse is now printed among the fragments of Attius by Ribbeck.⁴

¹ Nonius, page 17, 10 (11).

² *Tusc. Disput.* II, 23.

³ *Adversaria* (1564), II, 19. So Schütz, *Aeschylus* (1821).

⁴ *Scaen. Rom. Poesis Frag.* (Teubner, 1897), II, p. 216.

However, whether Attius or Cicero is responsible for the use of *adulat* in this verse, no one has doubted that Aeschylus used here the word *πρoοσάλει*, the equivalent in both literal and metaphorical sense of the Latin word. Both the simple and the compound verb occur elsewhere in his extant works; perhaps not often enough to justify L. Schmidt (*Prometheus*, 1870) in saying that it is a favorite word with the poet. And it has no meaning which throws any additional light upon the word used to translate it in our passage.

There is one element in the description of a scene of violence which is always instinctively looked for and rarely omitted — the *sprinkling* of the victim's blood. There is no need to cite passages either ancient or modern to show how often this touch of horror and repulsiveness is used to heighten the effect. And translators of this passage, who are naturally more concerned with the effectiveness of the picture than with the accurate rendering of one word, are not unlikely to make *adulat* bear some such meaning. So, for example, G. F. Schoemann¹ (1844):

“Erhebt er laut den gellen Schrei, und hohen Flugs
Enteilend trieft der Schwingen Paar von meinem Blut.”

So naturally does this idea of *sprinkling* seem to belong here that one is tempted to solve all difficulties by emending a text that does not exist. If it could be assumed that the translator, whether Attius or Cicero, had misread his Greek text, or that a copyist had already substituted ΤΠΟCCΑΙΝΕΙ for ΤΠΟCCΑΙΝΕΙ, the passage would be clear: “With a scream he soars aloft and from his pluméd tail *sprinkles* my gore (upon me).”

But the rule of the “harder reading” would forbid such an explanation, and it is not, in fact, necessary to resort to emendation to get a satisfactory meaning. The commonly accepted explanation of this passage seems to have originated with Turnebus.² It had been discussed before his time, and

¹ Schoemann courageously undertook to rewrite the *Prometheus Unbound* from the extant fragments, and his German drama is interesting, if not exactly Aeschylean.

² *Adversaria*, l. c.

he somewhat scornfully refers to one commentator's view: "Non deest qui *lambit* exponat."¹ Curiously enough this idea recurs in the work of an American translator (G. A. Otis, 1839), who renders the line:

"And laps my blood from off his feathery tail."

The *lapping* tongue of an eagle would seem to be a good match for the oft-mentioned and long-sought hen's teeth! And remembering the phrase *sublime avolans* one might hold that to do this in mid-air must have been a considerable feat even for the satellite of Jove.

Turnebus, however, has his own explanation:

"[Cum] et avolans aquila solere[t] tractu caudae sanguinolenta Promethei vulnera perstringere cruorisque aliquid detergere, eleganter et venuste tactum caudae attingentis, et tamquam palantis sanguinem, adulationem esse appellatum censeo, quod adulari proprie caudae fit."

Modern philology does not seem to be so positive that *adulatur* has to do with the *tail*,² and Nonius only goes so far as to say (17, 4): *Adulatio est blandimentum proprie canum quod et ad homines tractum consuetudine est.*

But it was evidently the phrase *cruoris . . . detergere* which attracted the attention of later editors, and led to the commonly received explanation of the word *adulat*. So, for example, Heine, *Tusc. Disp.* (1884): "Wegfliegend wischt der Adler mit den Federn des Schwanzes das Blut ab. Die ursprüngliche Bedeutung von *adulare* ist hier gewahrt."

The next step, of course, is to explain why the eagle wiped the blood away. The reason is given clearly by Anthon, *Tusc. Disp.* (1869): "In order that the wound may be dried and begin to heal again!" Kühner is cited as authority for

¹ Apparently Philippus Beroaldus, quoted in an edition of Aeschylus (1557) with other commentators: "Adulatur, hoc est, lambit, ebibit et intrinsecus penetrando populatur: sicut adulando faciunt adulatores, qui feriunt interiora ventris, ut inquit Hieronymus!"

² Thurneysen in the new *Thesaurus*, s.v. *adulo*: *Inc. orig. fortasse cf. c. ind. vālah, vārah "cauda," lituan. valai "pili caudae equinae."* So Walde, s.v. *adulo*, but adds that Vaniček, 270, and Curtius, 359, refer to root *uel*; cf. *volvo*.

this, and he does indeed give such an explanation: "Ut exsiccetur et rursum consanescat" (*Tusc. Disp.* 1846). The idea seems to have come from F. A. Wolf, whose lectures are quoted in Orelli's edition of the *Tusculans* (1829): "Als wollte er dasz die Leber bald wieder heile." And he says that something of this kind had been intended by Turnebus.

In estimating the value of such an explanation as this we must, of course, remember that we are dealing with poetry, not with science; with a poet, and not a faunal hunter. In the presence of a metaphysical liver we need not insist upon a strictly ornithological eagle. Aeschylus conceivably may have represented the winged hound of Zeus as rendering first aid to the injured Titan by wiping his wound with its tail. He may not have stopped, or cared, to inquire whether birds would prefer wings or tails for such an act. But the grotesqueness of the image is such that if Aeschylus did mean to say this, one can hardly blame the eagle for taking his revenge later on the one who had so pictured him.¹

But before we brand the dramatist as so gross a nature-faker, it is worth while to ask whether there is no other way to interpret the verse, without inventing a new meaning for *adulat*. May it not be taken in its ordinary and accepted sense? The blood-bedabbled eagle soars aloft and, as any bird would do under such circumstances, flirts his plumes, and the gore drips upon the mangled Titan. The poet by an *irony* applies the same verb to the ravaging scourge, shaking his feathers over his victim, that would be applied to a man who stands before you with fawning, wheedling gestures, or the ingratiating dog, whose wagging tail may possibly have suggested the formation of the word originally. Such a touch of grim humor seems quite in the Aeschylean vein, and it is the overlooking of this irony which has made the apparent necessity of finding a new sense for the verb. There is really no "wiping off" in the case at all, and that meaning of *adulor* should be omitted from the dictionaries, as it has already been from the *Thesaurus*. Nor is the idea of *sprinkling* more than

¹ Suidas, s.v. Αἰσχύλος: χελώνης ἐπιρριφείσης αὐτῷ ὑπὸ ἀετοῦ φέροντος κατὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἀπώλετο.

implied, and that chiefly by the use of the word *sanguinem* as object instead of the Titan himself.

I know of no English verb with the connotation of *προσ-σαίνει* or *adulat* which might be used to translate them. If we had such a word as "bewaggle," and used it of animals and flatterers, it might fill the requirements. The German can do better: "Er wedelt meine blutigen Wunden an." Used under the circumstances which are pictured in our fragment, such a word adds a touch of savage irony that is much more effective than the commentators' sophisticated eagle.

The old interpretation of *adulat* had already been rejected by Wecklein (*Prometheus*, 1878), who translates it in his note by 'anwedeln.' He is closely followed by F. H. Allen (*Prometheus*, 1891), who suggests 'wags at.'¹ And both refer to *Eumenides*, 244:

ὄσμη βροτείων αἱμάτων με προσγελά.

But if I understand their notes, especially as reinforced by the quotation of the verb *προσγελά*, neither editor intends to suggest the presence of an irony; in the view presented in this paper that is the all-important factor in the case.

¹ Allen's note reads: "adulat : *προσσαίνει*, 'wags at.' The eagle's tail gloats, as it were, over Prometheus' mangled flesh." But does *adulat* mean 'gloat' any more than it means 'wipe off,' unless it be taken in an ironical sense?